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AUTHOR Metcalf, Marguerite Pearce
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ABSTRACT

High school teaching is a fertile and unexplored field for speech communication educators. Speech communication courses and teachers are needed in high schools because the nature of their training is broad and interdisciplinary and equips them to render unique and essential services at the secondary level. High school speech teachers are faced with the challenge of designing courses and textbooks which meet the needs of the uncomfortable and self-conscious adolescent, the black who uses dialect and must become bilingual, the career oriented, and the gifted. There is valid evidence to support the inclusion of speech communication courses, taught by specialists in the field, in high school curricula. (EE)

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Why Should a Speech-Communication Teacher Choose to Teach in High School?

by

Marguerite Pearce Metcalf, Parkview High School

Little Rock, Arkansas

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WHY SHOULD A SPEECH-COMMUNICATION TEACHER CHOOSE TO TEACH IN HIGH SCHOOL?

At the SCA Convention in Chicago, I ran into a friend of mine, a university professor who had just written a book for high school teachers and prospective teachers in which he recommended four high school textbooks as being acceptable in coverage and treatment of material. I commented that we in the Little Rock System use three of the four, but I added I consider them far from adequate. Then I followed with, "College professors shouldn't write high school textbooks - they don't understand what is going on in high school. Only high school teachers understand the needs and approach - they are the ones who should write the books." His reply? "High school teachers can't.... don't have the time."

Well he may be right though several books have come out recently done, at least in part, by high school teachers. We do have a slightly different schedule from that of the average professor. Most of you are aware of that already. If we are lucky we teach five classes a day. If we are unlucky we teach more which means we have no preparation period. If we are lucky we teach all speech communication and/or drama - no PE, civics, English, government, economics, or home ec. Other period responsibilities may well include the debate team to coach, the Senior Play to do, PTA every first Wednesday, Faculty meeting every first Monday, an assembly program to do, parent conferences to arrange, an assembly program to plan, tests to make out, tests to grade.....

#2. why teach

And so it goes! Then why does anyone teach in high school? Well, there are reasons. Surely every teacher has her own. Let me give you mine.

1. Students in high school need speech-communication training;

2. The needs of these students offer great challenge to speech-communication teachers;

3. High school teaching is a fertile and unexplored field for speech-communication teachers.

This is where the action is!

Why? Why are speech-communication courses and teachers needed in high school? It seems to me our training, broad and interdisciplinary in nature, equips us to render unique and essential services at this level.

Adolescence, if you remember, is a time of uncomfortable awkardness. Legs are gangling - arms are too long - hands are too large. This is a time when poise is at an all-time low and the motivation for acquiring it is at an all-time high. Teenagers very much want to communicate, but they are often reluctant to do so because they are so uncomfortable - so unsure of themselves. Given the opportunity over and over again to communicate before his peer group - given adequate guidance and understanding by a capable speech-communication teacher - can make the difference between success and failure in a youngster's life and success at this point is very important - an absolute must!

I am reminded of Frank whose father was a successful and wealthy executive -, a fine man who had made it the hard way. Frank was trying desperately to measure up! But he was too small - he was too timid - and anyway, he had decided he was not as smart

as his father. All in all he was a pretty miserable sophomore. Numerous appearances before his class, however, with a little development each time - and a bit of praise from his teacher led to second place honors in a speech contest. The rest was easy. Father was proud - Frank was pleased. He became confident - success in other phases of school life followed. Now - years later - Frank is president of the largest soft-drink bottling company in Arkansas - his own business - he is a handsome, fine, poised, young executive. He communicates effectively because he grew to adulthood using the training he had acquired in high school.

Now what if you are an adolescent and you are black? You may not have to live up to a father who is an executive, but you do have to live up to the white students who have had it better longer than you have. Probably neither your verbal nor your non-verbal communication is understood by your white classmates or your white teachers. A speech-communication teacher can make all the difference. Most of us have lived around Blacks all of our lives, but few of us have known them as individuals. The training a speech-communication teacher has in linguistics, phonology, semantics plus some intensive study of Black Language gives her a better understanding of their problems and an opportunity for helping both black and white students adjust to the integrated situation through natural and effective communication. Hopefully, the training has also provided her with the desire and ability to leave prejudices and narrow-mindedness behind so that each black student receives the same careful attention and concern as the whites. Communicating is

very important to black people. Their wish to perfect it is very strong. "Rapping", i.e., talking to "put themselves in a favorable light" is a necessary part of their life-style - just as "shucking" was and sometimes still is. After they become bi-lingual and acquire proficiency in Standard American Speech, they are equally effective in communicating dynamically - both verbally and non-verbally.

I think of Reggie who had the potential for being a belligerent, militant when he came to Parkview - after the predominantly black school - where he had been a student leader was closed. Reggie ran for president of the senior class against four white students who were also in communication class. Only Reggie asked for help on his speech. This was very important to him. He had to say it just right, he told me. How we worked...day after day. At the final rehearsal, I said, "And Reggie, tell your friends no Black Panther salute today!" He nodded - he understood perfectly that such a non-verbal show of strength from his black brothers would turn off many whites - especially those who were undecided. There was no Black Panther salute. Reggie made the best speech of anyone there. He was elected. Reggie learned he could communicate in Standard American Soeech as well as Black Dialect. He grew in his position. Reggie was our first Black to speak at graduation.

Yes, speech-communication training at the high school level can make all the difference in the life of an adolescent - in the life of a young Black.

How about the student who is pursuing a career education plan? He definitely needs training - but no course is as yet designed for him. How about the gifted student - the

genius in science and math who - after doing all of that research - must learn to make it clear someday to the laymen who comprise his Board of Directors. What special training can we offer him? He needs to acquire it now while he is getting his other foundation. And speaking of foundations, what do we have for the slow learner - white or black - the basic student who can't read? He, too, must communicate, but there are no courses developed for him. Then, there is that solid citizen who is average and will comprise the backbone of our society in business, politics, education, even religion. He will speak at Kiwanis, will direct the Cancer Drive, and be featured on Layman's Sunday at his church. How practical are our courses for this little guy - how relevant? His communication must be direc direct - clear - effective - even dynamic on occasion.

There was Ira - short of stature - bright - eager - but Ira had a hard time with geometry and physics, and he couldn't write a theme the English Department would accept. He did not write well at all. But he learned to communicate orally - Oh did he! "Ira", I would say, "You could sell anything. Surely you will make a million before you are thirty!" One day he called me from New York to say he was twenty-eight and he had more than two million. It was the day his company went public...a business envisioned and developed by him...now with branches in thirty-two cities. When he called, he said, "Because Mrs. Metcalf you gave me the training I needed, you had to be the first to know. You taught me how to communicate. Anyway - you always believed I could do it!"

Ira's training did not come from the dull, impractical textbooks we have to use - nor

could it have resulted from the fun and games approach that is the current rage in some speech-communication circles. But it was related to his ability and his needs - tailored for him and for hundreds like him.

Here, then, is the first challenge for high school teachers to design speech-communication courses that will meet the needs of the uncomfortable adolescent, the Black who uses dialect and must become bi-lingual, the career-oriented, the gifted, and the Iras - the rejects of the Chaucer and Hamlet Crowd - the Iras who will be your grocer, your minister, your housewife consumer advocate, and your young executive.

But designing the courses is not enough. A second challenge to high school speech-communication teachers is to write textbooks to be used at the secondary level - books that will complement the teacher's planning. These must be books that reflect current research and methodology in communication - books that are relevant to students' interests - books that are within the grasp of their understanding yet deep enough to stimulate independent study and individual effort. The content of these books should not have to be used in daily class discussion but as guidelines for student involvement in a variety of communication situations. These should be books that present principles, ethics, and ideas intended to be applied to realistic, everyday communication needs.

The only two acceptable high school textbooks to meet these requirements - the only ones I know - have at least one strong high school teacher as one of the authors. As student needs change and research progresses in the several areas of communication - these books

must be up-dated and revised - not merely reprinted and given a new jacket.

This structuring of courses and writing textbooks to accompany them is not an eeasy task. It calls for careful planning, organization, constant contact with new developments in the field, and then adapting each course to meet the needs of the students in a particular group. And the teaching of the courses is alo challenging. It means individual grading, allowing for a student's problems, progress, and performance. It means knowing each student and being concerned about him. It means being worried about a youngster when he fails and showing pleasure at each little success. It means letting the course serve as the foundation for competitive events and the polishing of contest entries be done outside of class...a time-consuming activity. This, too, is a challenge....a real challenge.

Competiton is healthy. In a classroom, it can generate enthusiasm, development, growth, and create an atmosphere that is almost electric. But competition is one thing and a structured contest is quite another. Some students enjoy the contest circuit. Others prefer to use their talent and energy in other ways. So - while the class, the course in speech-communication may very well lay a foundation for debate, extemp, oratory, poetry reading, prose reading - the class time must never be used for preparing students for these events. If we wish respectability in the curriculum, we must earn it. If we wish to stand along side of the "solids" we must merit the recognition. Training a few gifted students for contests while other students sit idly by is a practice that must be relegated to the past.

It is embarrassing to remember we ever did such things. It is even more embarrassing to observe that it is still being done in some high schools. Our entire field still suffers from the "speak-a-piece" era - even in colleges. Some of the books currently popular at the secondary level even carry chapters devoted to "contest speaking" and "declamation" to be used as regular class assignments. The latter was recently noted in a high school text bearing a new title, new jacket, and a 1973 copyright! How out-of-step can we be as we approach the 21st century!

The final challenge facing speech-communication teachers who elect to teach in high school is only beginning but will generate much action in the years ahead. English teachers are currently being asked to teach units in oral communication they are ill-equipped to handle. Time was when English teachers taught grammar and literature. Now, they are expected to possess the expertise of a speech-communication major for their scope of assignments includes linguistics, phonetics, oral interpretation, group discussion, reader's theatre, and play production. They are, in essence, teaching speech-communication skills with little or no preparation. We,who have chosen the oldest discipline in the world as our profession,permitted this state of affairs to develop. We have been neither jealous nor assertive about our field. The fact that English teachers in high school "also teach speech" is our fault - not the fault of the curriculum builders. But the dissipation of our field must stop, and it is the challenge - even the duty of the well-trained young teachers who enter speech-communication as a profession to initiate the change. English as a subject

must go! In its place we must put oral communication, written communication, American literature, English literature - the latter two to be included in humanities courses along with history, art, music, architecture. Then, of course, we will have to place theatre, music, art in the fine arts and in secondary schools industrial arts, physical science and social sciences. The revision is already beginning in some states. Hopefully, yours is among them. Colleges and universities made the division years ago. We must do the same. The educational system in American public schools must take a look at itself and abandon the cherished belief that four years of English can do all things for all students! Any professor who has tried to help his freshmen compensate for high school deficiencies can point to the weaknesses in the present curriculum structure. So - teachers entering the high school teaching field to establish strong speech-communication departments have their challenges - but what an exciting and rewarding career it can be. I envy you. I wish I could be on the front line!

When this revision comes - and come it will - speech-communication teachers in secondary schools will be much in demand and jobs will be plentiful indeed. Meantime, you say to me, "Are there any jobs - full-time speech-communication jobs- available?" If you have had any contact with Dr. Robert Hall, SCA Placement Director, lately, you already know this is a time of a small "job market" everywhere. At the Ph.D. level jobs are plentiful only in technical theatre and debate. Of course, if you want to go into the business world and do communications for a large company, you have other opportunities. But if you

really want to teach, your chances of finding a position in high school are every bit as good as they are of getting into a college position. Besides, consider what the alternatives are. You can always go back to graduate school, get lost in the maze of students, remain an unknown instructor the rest of your life and die of boredom! I would like to mention that we have no organized way of getting the applicant and the employer together at the present time. That is, the professional organizations at the regional and national level have no placement service. But that is in the offing. We must have many more high school people in the professional organizations before they can afford to staff such an undertaking.

And here is an opportunity for the speech-communication teachers who elect to teach in high school and make a career of it. Work in your professional organizations from the state level on up. Make your influence felt. High school people who are eager and able to take responsibility for professional growth are much in demand in all of the professional organizations They are asked to serve on governing boards and committees, to write articles, even to contribute to books. This recognition is not only very advantageous to the teacher but a real boost for the field. Even state departments of education are impressed when high school teachers are asked to appear on national programs and write in regional, national journals. The professional organizations have long been dominated by college and university people because they were in the majority and because there were few, if any, elementary and high school people to call upon. Now, they are seeking the career high school or elementary school speech-communication teacher who

is willing to assume some of the leadership.

Well, there are many rewards in high school teaching - especially when one is teaching anything as important as speech-communication and drama. I have not even mentioned the rewards. Salaries? They are not bad - in line with other teaching positions - even in college. No one goes into any teaching position to make a fortune. Are you appreciated? You are. High school teachers are remembered - especially if you have taught a youngster to communicate when he may have been withdrawn or timid or very uncomfortable while doing so. And, then, let me say something I have implied but not put into words - teaching in high school is fun! It keeps you young! It is never dull - full of excitement because your students are at the age when they are unrestrained in their enthusiasm for life. Moreover, they are flexible - they are eager - they are just delightful! You can see what you have done for them or with them because you have them long enough to witness their growth and development. And that watching them grow is a rewarding experience, indeed. You can see a miracle before your very eyes!

So - it's a great life! I would love to go back and do it all over again. I began teaching in elementary and high school. I left it for a decade of teaching in colleges and universities - and I loved my time there. But I returned to high school teaching because I liked it. And - would you believe it! I have never been sorry!